

ANTHROPOLOGY AND (THE) CRISIS

Responding to crisis in Afghanistan

'Hey, you've lived in Afghanistan; you must know what's going on; what's your view about the crisis?'

My view? In short, that, despite the magnitude of the terrorist atrocities of 11 September, and whatever their causes, the attack on Afghanistan has been an unjustified and unintelligent way of pursuing the professed aims of the attackers. But this view owes little or nothing to my being either an anthropologist or an 'old Afghan hand' (fieldwork there between 1968 and 1972). And, whatever the media and the polls may say, I've not met many people who didn't share my view.

Responses to the crisis

The crisis does, though, once again raise the question of how anthropologists respond when their former ethnographic subjects find themselves at the centre of a major disaster. Some respond by throwing themselves into media exposure: they write letters or articles in the papers, appear on TV or radio interviews, current affairs programmes, chat shows... and they learn, if they haven't done it before, how to adjust and edit their 'expert knowledge' to serve some current media agenda. Others watch, with growing cynicism, the antics of the instant pundits who emerge whenever the world's attention moves on to some new crisis, and acknowledge, with a sense of powerlessness and futility, that their own field experience was limited in time and space, and not particularly relevant to the current crisis.

It is among the latter that I locate myself, now as in previous, lesser crises. Having been abroad (and beyond all media but radio) on 11 September and for a week afterwards, I returned to find the circus in full swing, and an astonishing array of information, misinformation and opinion available – if one sought it – in the various media. What was there left to say about the continuing terrors in the aftermath of 11 September, or of their background, or their likely future outcome? So much has now been said, and far more eloquently and with far greater impact than I could hope to manage.

So I don't feel so bad about having declined, on numerous occasions, to contribute my own instant and forgettable 'sound-bites'. If I had commented, I would have added my voice to the many who have already sought to emphasize the complexity of the situation (e.g., there is no simple equation Taliban = Pashtun = Islam = terrorism...), the dishonesty and hypocrisy of the rhetoric spouted by those attacking Afghanistan, the stupidity of the means chosen to achieve both the openly stated and the hidden aims of the 'war', the hideous farce of simultaneously dropping



Cartoon by Benson.

bombs and inappropriate food parcels while refusing aid experts' requests to be allowed to provide proper food relief in an efficient way, so that thousands, possibly millions, of innocent Afghans will likely die to pay for the events of 11 September.

The 'experts' who have meanwhile offered sane information and perspectives have included, in particular some NGO workers who have spent the last decade or more working in and around Afghanistan, whose perspectives may be narrow but who have considerable field experience, often longer and better focused than that of anthropologists with their 1-2 years of fieldwork; secondly, political scientists and long-term regional press correspondents, often with a wider comparative perspective, but relatively shallow local knowledge; and finally Afghans themselves, inside or outside the country, primarily politicians or academics (or both), some with distinct political, ethnic or religious perspectives. Notable among Afghan commentators have been a number of anthropologists: Nazif Shahrani at Indiana University, Ashraf Ghani of the World Bank, Jamil Hanifi at Michigan State, and Sayed Askar Mousavi at Oxford, all of whom have been active in addressing the

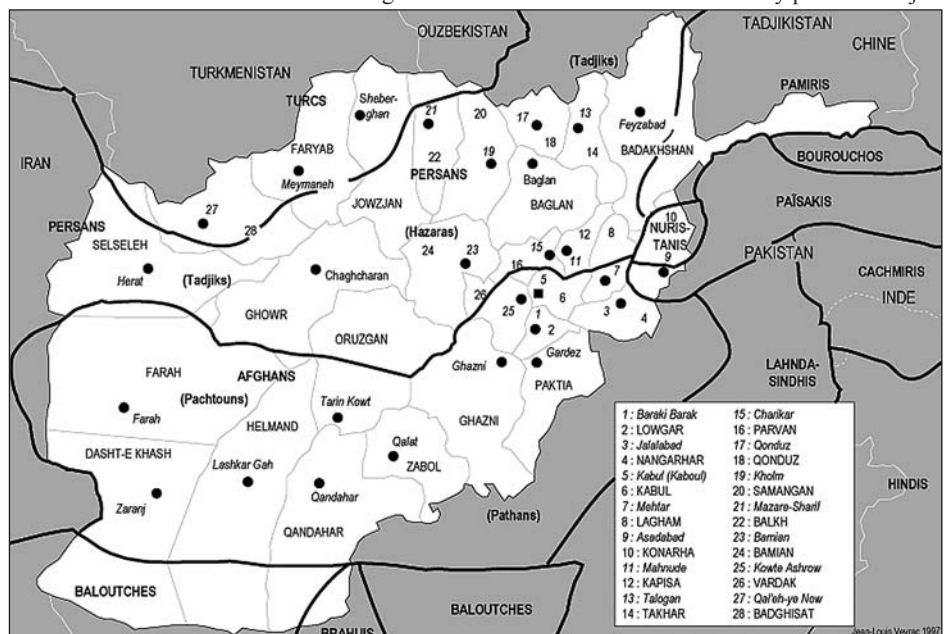
media or organizing public meetings on Afghan perspectives on the crisis.

Most non-Afghan anthropologists (and other academic fieldworkers), like me, have local knowledge dating from several regimes and several decades ago. Among the few exceptions is Pierre Centlivres, retired Professor of Ethnology at Neuchâtel, Switzerland, who has visited Afghanistan regularly and has always been prepared to engage the French-language media on Afghan affairs, and on this occasion has done so repeatedly with his usual lucidity and good sense.¹

Enough said, then?

Well, no. There are, as ever, important voices that are not being heard. With the exceptions mentioned, few Afghans, from inside or outside Afghanistan, have been asked for their views. The media continue to depict Afghans either as indecipherable and intolerable Taliban, or as helpless victims. What do the 'victims' think, what is their perception and prescription for the future of their country? How can we know? Will the 'alliance', in its efforts to find a 'broad-based' transitional government to replace the Taliban, listen to what the Afghan people want?

As has often been pointed out, successive wars since the 19th century have been marked – and to an extent moulded – by advances in media technology. For most of the world, television is probably still the main window onto the crisis, and indeed, following 'CNN's war' in 1991, many have already declared this to be 'Al-Jazeera's war'. More significant, I think, is that, along with Kosovo, this is one of the major wars of the internet age. Although the 'digital divide' is still vast, and the internet is still not available to the world's masses, it is far more accessible than in any previous major



In Afghanistan, more than fifty languages are spoken. Their broad divisions are indicated in this Ethnolinguistic map of Afghanistan by Jean-Louis Veyrac, 1997.

conflict. Those with access can find on the web not only virtually everything that is available on the air or in the press, but they can – and do – listen to and participate in any number of online discussions, through list-servers and chat rooms. For anthropologists, moreover, there are already special compilations of relevant resources available, both on the web and in print.²

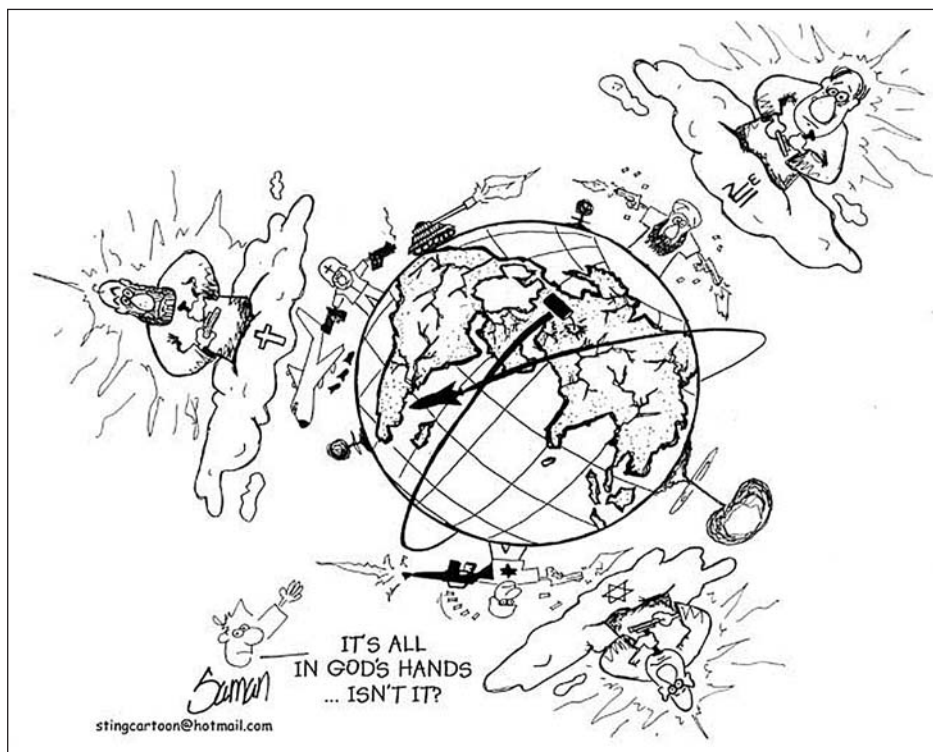
The Afghaniyat Listserv

Let me draw attention to one particular Afghan listserv, for two purposes. First, to encourage people to listen to Afghans from around the world, discussing constructively what is happening to them, their country and their people. Secondly, this ‘virtual fieldwork’ moves me as an anthropologist to reflect on how far it differs from the physical fieldwork I did in Afghanistan thirty years ago.

‘Afghaniyat’ (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/afghaniyat>) claims to be the largest Afghan listserv. It started in April 2001; it is public, and is conducted exclusively in English, apart from some transliterated greetings and poetry. I joined in July, when there were about 500 members; by early November there were nearly 1000, and several thousand messages had been archived. Afghaniyat’s aims are as follows:

Although this listserv may be political, it is not affiliated with any political group, nor supports or sympathizes with any of the warring factions both in or outside Afghanistan. The goal of the Listserv and founders was to unite the displaced people of Afghanistan under the concept of Afghaniyat. Its creators are a few university students wanting to connect the Afghan community. What is the meaning of Afghaniyat? This Listserv is based on the idea of discovering, fostering, and implementing the concepts of Afghaniyat (Afghan-hood). In order to achieve these goals, we need to better understand the social, cultural and political challenges of Afghanistan and Afghans worldwide. The server will serve as a medium for exchange of views, debate, announcements, news and weekly discussions about Afghanistan and Afghans throughout the world.

A core of up to thirty active members usually have something to say on the main issues that are raised. (Many of them are also mem-



‘God’. Cartoon by Saman for Iranian.com.

bers of another listserv, Afghan Solidarity, which was started later and remains smaller and more restricted but has posted many more messages). To judge from their names and their messages, they are almost all Afghan men and women, mostly living in North America, but many also in Europe and a scattering of countries around the world. The most eloquent and active early member is based in Mexico. Not surprisingly, no messages come direct from Afghanistan, though members report on recent visits there. Many members seem to know each other, whether as neighbours in ‘real life’, or separated by thousands of miles. Others have come to know each other through the listserv.

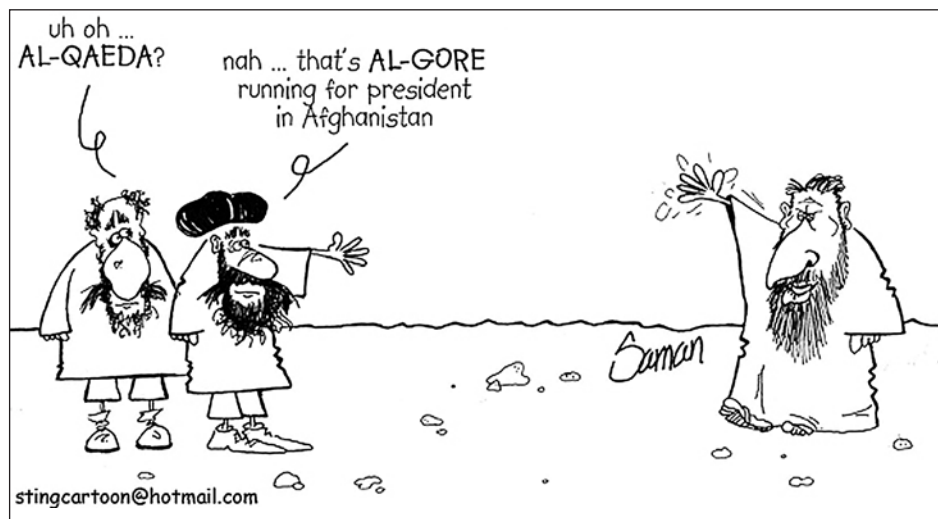
Much of the material consists of circulated news and analysis, both published articles taken from websites and contributions from members. Only a few articles give rise to comment and discussion. One piece written by a member, ‘Time to face the mirror’ (DR 15.10),³ which moved me to tears, received no

response. Several members have objected to the circulation of news and analysis articles as irrelevant to the discussion – perhaps, like me, they simply do not have the time to read all the articles in full, but merely file them for future reference... At any rate the moderators on several occasions have defended it: ‘I think its best to learn about leading analysts’ thinking patterns, especially those who help shape policy in this country. Their thinking patterns reveal the possible outcome of policy in this country, which has consequences for regional and country specific stability’ (30 October).

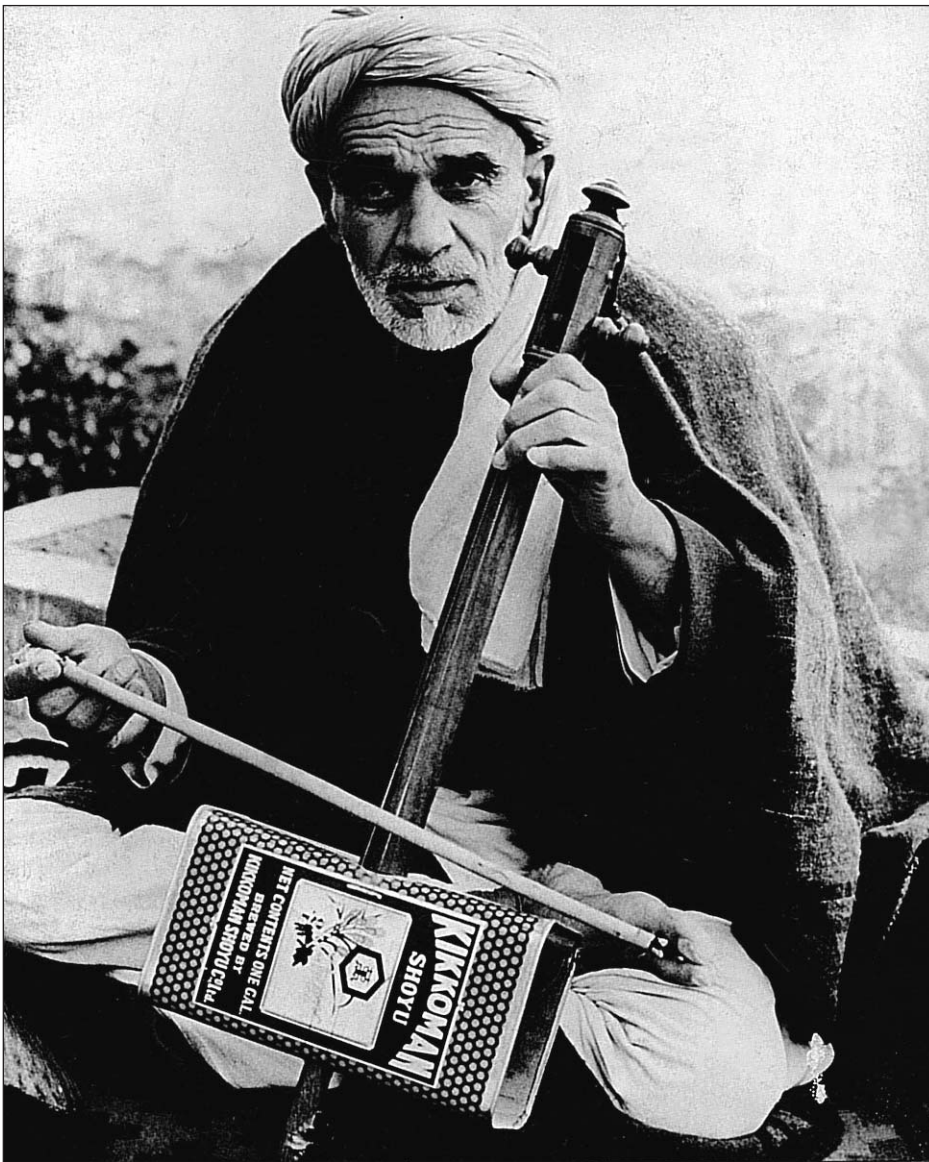
Some debates

The liveliest discussions, not surprisingly, have concerned on the one hand the sources of internal disunity among Afghans, and on the other, relationships with neighbouring countries, notably Pakistan. Let me mention a few ‘threads’ – often simultaneous and interconnecting – that occupied the members during October.

There was an extended and sometimes heated discussion (about 45 messages posted between 16 and 21 October) about the documentary ‘Beneath the Veil’, fronted by Saira Shah, originally shown on Channel 4 in June, then on CNN on 26 August – though the discussion did not begin until nearly two months later. Having been very widely seen, the programme provoked comments from members that were perhaps predictable, to do with the representation of the country, its people and its politics. Several members were happy that Afghanistan was receiving some coverage, and that the evils of the Taliban were being properly exposed. Critics questioned Shah’s credentials (as an Afghan and a Muslim) and motives, as well as what they saw as the depiction of ‘Afghanistan and Afghans as wild and 3rd century barbarians’ (NK 16.10), and a bias against the Taliban. Taliban supporters – and



‘Al Qaeda’. Cartoon by Saman for Iranian.com.



S.T. SAKATA

Ghichak played by Agha Panjshiri, Kabul. Music plays an important part in Afghan life. The Taliban prohibited music, but it continued to play a part in the lives of refugees. This photo accompanies an article by Lorraine Sakata on Afghan musical instruments in *Aghanistan Journal* 6(3), 1979.

others – deplored an emphasis on human rights issues at the expense of the immediate problems of famine and misery – for example: ‘I am sorry to say but when people are being bombed or hungry, diseased, dying, and homeless they will not think about education and freedom, my sister’ (NK 18.10), and ‘[I] must remind you that people in Afghanistan are dying due to the lack of food and medication, not a lack of education or college degrees. People barely have any food to eat, but we here we are protesting their right to wear make-up and get an education, as was presented in that very biased and documentary, *Beneath the veil*. We must worry about feeding our people then focus on education and other rights’ (AJ 19.10).

Debate raged as to whether those raised outside Afghanistan were more or less Afghan or Muslim than those inside who have brought the country to such a pass, and on the comparative records of the Taliban and the Northern Alliance warlords. Several members, mindful of the listserver’s agenda, sought to transcend divisive issues – ‘Everyone has a right to their opinion so lets please not attack each others views for once for the sake of our poor nation

and its poor people. We are all afghans and no one has the right to say the other one is wrong. We all represent one group of afghans or another. Remember afghanistan is a country of different ethnic groups so our culture, language and even religion are different so we have different views and opinions but that does not make one or the other any less of an afghan. Can we for once forget about our religion, culture, ethnic group et al and just be AFGHANS FROM AFGHANISTAN????!!!!’ (NK 18.10). One response was: ‘[E]ven though you have a heart warming idea, how can we forget about our religion and culture and ethnic group most importantly? I am just asking? How can we forget about our deen? our culture? I think the best thing is to not forget about our religion, culture, and ethnic background, but to incorporate that into an acceptance for other people’ (RP 18.10).

A similar debate in response to the death on 11 September of Ahmad Shah Massoud (17 messages, mainly in mid-October) polarized those for whom he was and remains a hero, and those who felt he was a traitor; but it was curtailed on 24 October by the following message from the moderators:

On September 12, 2001 Afghaniyat Moderators decided that we could not ignore the political and social development and opened up our forum to include political debates until January 1, 2002. Then, we will reevaluate our policy again. See, if the discussions brought any value added to the forum. We have been objective and allowing all sides to voice themselves who have joined our forum. While we are noticing a very lively discussion among the majority of member, we are also noticing positional argumentation. This is unproductive and yields no positive results. Consequently, we ask that you please direct your comments about the former Cmdr. Ahmad Shah Masoud to the proper listservers dedicated to debating his role. We highly doubt arguing about his heroism or questionable deeds will yield to progressive intellectual discussions. For the most part, we should not be engaging in personal attacks or personality defamations. Intrigue us with your delightful views, solutions, and discussions. Most importantly, please secure the sanctity of Afghaniyat.

More constructive – though similar in content – was the debate that followed the posting on 18 October of ‘Proposals for a new Constitution’ (13 messages, 18-29.10), leading to a sharing of information about non-Muslim minorities (21 messages, 18.10-25.10). The following message stood out. ‘All citizens of Afghanistan must be Muslim. Non-Muslims have no place in Afghanistan, except as occasional visitors or servants of the Afghan people. We must not tolerate any evil practices. Non-Islamic people are the root cause of many problems in Afghanistan’ (GB 20.10). This instant riposte was widely echoed: ‘You and Your comments are an insult to the name of Afghan and Islam. When first they founded that country no one said this place is just for muslims. Do you have any idea who caused these problems for us? Let me tell you the answer my friend: Narrow minded, un-educated people like yourself. You can read your own email as a non-muslim Afghan and judge yourself. In fact, people like you are the true enemy of Islam and Afghanistan. I just don’t find words to answer your comments’ (MM 20.10). There was no response from GB.

Overcoming divisions

At the time of writing (early November), the most active issues are a lively formulation of responses rejecting the partitioning of Afghanistan between a Taliban-controlled south and a NA-controlled north, as proposed by Peter Schweizer of the Hoover Institute in *USA Today* (29 October), and an ongoing and unresolved debate over Pakistan’s role in Afghan history and politics.

What comes through, whatever the issue, is a developing agreement on the necessity for mutual tolerance and understanding between those of more or less Muslim persuasion, and between those of different ethnic (cultural-linguistic) backgrounds. Since 1979 (the Soviet invasion), I have attended (and sometimes convened or chaired) gatherings of exiled Afghans in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. Such occasions are typically marked by a mix of politeness and emotional outbursts; not surprisingly, people with deeply felt opinions on highly sensitive political and cultural

matters find it hard to listen to, even to attend the same meetings as, people with different opinions. But in this internet forum – particularly in the aftermath of 11 September – members have been able, sometimes anonymously, to express remarkably varied opinions, and appear to be willing to modify them, under the judicious guidance of the moderators. Differences are often resolved in heartfelt and articulate appeals to higher values and the theme of Afghan solidarity and identity as the only way through the crisis. Of course, the use of English restricts access to those with some facility in the language, but also avoids a major contentious cultural issue: the respective importance of the two main languages, Pashto and Persian. In sum, for the observer there is much to learn about how exiled Afghans are renegotiating the elements of their identity and working out ways of facing a desperately uncertain future.

'Internethnography'

And for us as anthropologists, there is much to consider still about the possibilities of ethnography on the internet. Having recently supervised a series of graduate projects and dissertations relating to some aspect of new media, I now conduct daily 'internethnography', fieldwork on the Internet, and find myself reflecting on issues of method: what assumptions about the nature of the 'virtual community' and its members are justifiable, and how and if to participate as well as to observe.

Here, for what they are worth, are my initial reflections. Much of the small but growing literature on ethnography of the internet is concerned with issues of ethics, anonymity and credibility:⁴ in a virtual community, some or all members may themselves be more or less imaginary. In the case of 'Afghaniyat', many members, including the moderator(s), are open about their identities, even including a business address in their messages. Others obviously disguise their identities, but are open with their feelings and opinions, while in 'real life' they might do the opposite. I am reasonably sure that, even if some identities are disguised, all are 'real' individuals, dealing with real problems and issues.

Do they differ significantly from the sub-

jects of a standard ethnography? I find them just as 'credible', if not more so. Over a period, the interested reader can infer, for example, from message styles and modes of address, elements of identity and personality such as generation, ethnic affiliation, gender, nationality, class, educational level, employment, political and religious persuasions, special interests. And even if the community remains loosely structured, distinct relationships soon develop. My own understanding of these identities and relationships is still rudimentary and continues to develop, and consequently I have not sought to give any indication of this 'social' dimension of the listserver in my brief quotations above.

In short, internethnography of an active and focused listserver such as Afghaniyat is possible, interesting and revealing. One can observe multiple, simultaneous, ongoing conversations conducted by a virtual community composed of real people. Compared to 'orthodox' fieldwork, the ethnographer has greater choice about whether to participate.⁵ Moreover, observation is not done in real time; 'events' (statements, exchanges), while constantly developing, can be 'replayed' at one's own pace and reflected on at leisure.

Is this internethnography a diversionary tactic, a response to my confusion as an anthropologist faced with a crisis in his 'field'? Perhaps. But I feel confident that it is more, and that it indicates hope for the future of both anthropology and the Afghan people. If one novelty of the present crisis is indeed the growing significance of the internet in its many facets, not the least important of these are listservers, particularly if some of the people affected by the crisis are able to use them to articulate their feelings, to analyse their predicament, to resolve their differences and to discuss their plans for the future. That sounds to me like the very stuff of ethnography. ●

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1. See for example, *Le Monde*, 28.09.01.

2. See for example the comprehensive (and regularly



Remains of the 1500-year-old Buddha statue in the central Afghan province of Bamiyan. At 53 metres high, and carved into the face of a cliff, this was one of the largest in the world until destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001. Before it was destroyed, offers came in from all over the world to help remove it intact. Replicas are being created, including in a sandstone cliff near Leshan, Western China, where Buddha statues had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. (See also Pierre Centlivres. Les Bouddhas d'Afghanistan. Paris: Editions Favre, 2001).

updated) list of 'Anthropological resources' relating to 'The September 11 Tragedy', sponsored by the Middle East Section of the American Anthropological Association, and hosted by section president Jon Anderson and president-elect and 'webshaykh' Dan Varisco <http://people.hofstra.edu/faculty/daniel_m_varisco/wtc.htm>. The on-line folklore journal *Newfolk* has put out a special issue on the emergent folklore of the WTC incident <<http://www.temple.edu/isllc/newfolk>>. The Asia Society in New York has produced a further compilation of sources <<http://www.asiasource.org/americacrisis/>>. The Department of Anthropology at UC Berkeley has announced the publication of a 600-page anthology entitled *September 11: Contexts and consequences*, edited by Misha Klein and Adrian McIntyre, available from CopyCentral, tel. 510-858-8649, email: muji@copycentral.com.

3. Although the listserver is public, and the authors of the comments usually give names, probably of 'real' identities, in my ignorance of the ethics and etiquette of quoting from listserver correspondence I prefer to refer to the authors by initials only: see below.

4. For references to ethnography on the internet, see for example <http://www.psy.kuleuven.ac.be/incap/Home/Cyber_anthropology/cyber_anthropology.html>, and <<http://www.cybersociology.com/>>

5. It is of course possible that some (all?) listserver members are ethnographers seeking to provoke 'action' to observe.

RAI Ethnographic Video Sales

[http://www.therai.org.uk/film/
video_sales.html](http://www.therai.org.uk/film/video_sales.html)

RAI Anthropological Index Online

<http://www.therai.org.uk/index/aio.html>